



Candidates decry state of health care

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WARWICK - The moderator at a candidates' forum on health care gave the participants a stark choice yesterday morning. Given impending cuts in Medicaid on the federal level, Channel 10 (WJAR) political reporter Bill Rappleye asked, would you use state money to fill the gaps, or would you prefer to increase fees or limit eligibility in a state-run health program for the poor and disabled?

Of the 10 candidates at the Rhode Island Health Center Association's annual meeting, only one or two (depending on how you take their answers) would go on record favoring either of these unpopular options. Governor Carcieri, a Republican who is running for reelection, said he has appointed a team to look for ways to save money in Medicaid. Although he didn't say whether he favored new fees or eligibility limits, he has advocated both in the past. "That's the world we are facing," he said yesterday. "People do not have an appetite to see their taxes go up."

Rodney Driver, an independent running for U.S. House in the second district, against U.S. Rep. James Langevin, favored having the state make up any federal losses in Medicaid funding. The state can do this by cutting back on waste, fraud and abuse within the budget, Driver said. The other candidates did little more than decry the Medicaid situation. Medicaid, which is financed jointly by the state and federal governments, is a growing portion of state budgets as medical costs increase and the number of uninsured people grows. The forum at the Crowne Plaza Hotel encompassed everyone running for every statewide or federal office on the November ballot.

Lt. Gov. Charles J. Fogarty, Carcieri's Democratic opponent in the race for governor, said that increasing fees in Medicaid would be counterproductive, because it would discourage people from obtaining care they need. The state should focus on preventive care and "making sure we do a much better effort at home and community care," Fogarty said. U.S. Sen. Lincoln Chafee, who is in a tough reelection fight, said the federal government should repeal the tax cuts to pay for Medicaid costs. "The state cannot take on new costs," Chafee said. Chafee's opponent, former Attorney General Sheldon Whitehouse, declared: "I think there has been a colossal failure of leadership on the federal level on this issue."

U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, agreeing with Chafee on the Medicaid question, said:

"I will be for repealing the top 1 percent of tax cuts and devote it to fully funding Medicaid." Langevin, a Democrat, also favored rolling back the federal tax cuts.

There were few specific, direct answers to any of the three questions posed to each candidate, which also included what to do about the growing number of uninsured people and how to finance the community health centers. Each candidate was limited to five minutes for the question on the uninsured, two minutes for the question on health-center financing, and one minute on the Medicaid dilemma.

Everybody applauded the community health centers, sponsor of the event, promising them the money they need to serve the poor and uninsured.

Everybody lamented the state of the health-care system and the growing number of uninsured people. A few ideas were thrown out. Chafee said the government needs to invest in medical information technology and to change laws governing malpractice insurance for doctors. Whitehouse proposed federal investment in information technology, saving money by improving quality of care and reducing errors, changing the reimbursement system so that good care is rewarded, and making sure that mental-health issues are covered as well as physical problems.

"The signals that are coming out of the health-care system are screams of agony," Whitehouse said. "It's a system that is screaming out for reform. . . . We simply have to get universal coverage." Kennedy called fixing the health-care system "a moral imperative" and also talked about the importance of mental-health care.

Jonathan P. Scott, Kennedy's Republican opponent, favored a "consumer-driven" health-care system in which people can buy lower-cost health insurance that doesn't cover as much as today's costlier plans. He also said Medicaid and Medicare should be run like the Federal Employees Health Benefit Program, in which enrollees select from several private insurers under contract with the federal government. Langevin said that a program similar to the federal benefit plan should be offered to all Americans, with the federal government negotiating the plans, and premiums paid through a payroll tax. Individuals would also have to pay a share, with a sliding scale for the poor.

"I do not agree that we should leave this to states to solve on their own," Langevin said. The two candidates for lieutenant governor, state Sen. Elizabeth H. Roberts, D-Cranston, and Reginald A. Centracchio, former adjutant general of the Rhode Island National Guard, a Republican, were given a different version of the Medicaid question. They were asked how the future of long-term care will affect programs and services in Medicaid. Both called for more emphasis on community-based care over institutional care.